

# Managing the Large(r) Classroom

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For most of us who teach in higher education, we entered the field expecting that our jobs were simply to teach information to students who were motivated, cooperative, and able learners. However, recent research suggests that despite the older ages of our students (typically 18 years and older), higher education instructors are facing concerns with classroom behavior (Carbone, 1999; Feldman, 2001). While it is incumbent upon instructors to deal with behavioral issues, few receive training in this area, and with recent budgetary constraints, we are faced with the additional challenge of teaching larger and larger classes.

Several authors have discussed ways to address inappropriate student behavior in postsecondary classrooms (e.g., Carbone, 1999; Schroeder & Robertson, 2008), as well as how to approach the teaching of large classes (e.g., Hilton, 1999). Many agree that prevention is an important component in dealing with classroom behavior concerns. Although a preventative approach to classroom management is an essential part of teaching in any classroom environment, there should be a distinction in tactics for larger classrooms (i.e., 50 or more students), as some strategies that may work in smaller classrooms cannot be easily transferred to those with more students.

What follows are several concrete ideas describing how to both prevent and deal with problem behavior in large(r) postsecondary classrooms. We highlight some of the more common antecedents to problem behaviors (student anonymity and lack of academic engagement) as well as problematic behaviors themselves (student absences, tardiness, inappropriate cell phone and laptop use, out of seat behavior, and cheating), and discuss prevention and/or intervention strategies to address them.

## Student Anonymity

One of the drawbacks of large classes is that instructors have few opportunities to make connections with individual students. These connections show positive outcomes, as simple but genuine words of encouragement or upbeat small talk can set a positive tone for students entering a classroom. Teacher greetings have been shown to be effective in reducing problem behaviors in the public school classroom (Allday & Pakurar, 2007). A greeting may reduce the anonymity that some individuals may experience in a large postsecondary class, as the student feels individually recognized and his/her presence is noted. There are encouraging findings that suggest that such personal, individual greetings may be an important strategy to facilitate both increased attention in the classroom and academic progress.

Teacher greetings have even been related to increased academic performance among college students (Weinstein, Laverghetta, Alexander, & Stewart, 2009). These results suggest that such personal acknowledgement in what can sometimes be an impersonal environment can increase student motivation. Personal greetings extended at the classroom door prior to class beginning can be mutually advantageous to faculty and students, providing opportunities for instructors to learn names, as they often report difficulty with this in large classes. This greeting time also allows an opportunity to answer

questions that students may have, since many students may demonstrate some inhibition about asking questions in front of a large class of peers.

## **Lack of Academic Engagement**

In addition to student anonymity, large classes make it difficult to effectively engage all students in the learning process. Students can easily attend class, but still fail to engage in any real thinking about the topic being presented. A division of the class into study and work groups is one strategy that has been shown to be effective to improve student involvement in the material, attendance taking, student-instructor communication, and the development of group skills and to reduce anonymity. Michaelsen (1994) demonstrated that team learning in large college classes may be associated with a number of benefits to students, including an increase in critical thinking skills, social support for at-risk students, an increase in interpersonal skills, and, for faculty members, it can help to engage their students in team learning endeavors, and to create a sense of enthusiasm and increased motivation. Assigning groups can be done at the beginning of the semester, and the process can be done quickly. A handout can be distributed to students containing a table into which they can write the names and contact information of team members, making the group information and sharing procedure organized and efficient.

Teams should be made up of 5-8 students and assigned a number. This can be an additional strategy for attendance-taking, where rather than calling each student's name, the instructor can simply call the group numbers, and each group leader can report absences for that day. The added dimension of a seating chart can also work well with this approach, helping the instructor to double check the attendance of the students who are being reported as absent.

Additionally, the study and work groups provide students with a small cohort of individuals with whom they may easily communicate and work throughout the semester. Students who are absent can contact others in his/her group to learn about missed assignments, notes, and materials. While students are always encouraged to communicate directly with the instructor about issues such as attendance and make-up work, the group members may provide additional help in these matters.

## **Student Absences**

High student attendance is important regardless of class size. When students are absent, they are disconnected from the transfer of knowledge and miss out on interactions with the instructor and their peers. To discourage student absences, we suggest the development of an attendance policy, attendance reporting, and/or ensuring that the classroom experience is rewarding to students.

An attendance policy should be developed by the instructor before the start of the course. It can include the university's regulations and guidelines for student attendance, as well as any instructor preferences (i.e., when and how to report absences, what work can be made up, what effect absences have on student grades, etc.). The policy should be added to the course syllabus, and the instructor should clearly explain expectations for attendance along with the predetermined consequences of absences.

Instructors of large classes are not exempt from attendance reporting requirements. While instructors without a teaching assistant may wonder how they can take attendance without sacrificing class time,

Green (2007) gives several suggestions to avoid losing class time while still fulfilling your duty to take attendance. These suggestions include: use of a seating chart or sign-in sheets, and greeting students as they enter the room to document their attendance. Regardless of the method selected, overt attendance reporting is likely to reduce student absences.

Ideally, attending class should be a rewarding experience for students, and absences should be at a minimum. Simply lecturing, which often occurs in the large classroom, in many cases reduces students' perceived need to attend class. We suggest the use of in-class assignments to enrich the student experience within the large classroom. This is just one way to increase the value of class time, which could lead to increased student attendance.

In-class assignments can serve at least two purposes for an instructor of a large class. First, in-class assignments can allow instructors to document who was in attendance. Second, these assignments can lead to dynamic active learning possibilities in large classes. Having students reflect on the day's material and complete a brief activity (e.g., journaling, written synopsis, topic specific worksheet, etc.) requires them to actively review and reflect upon their own learning. Instructors can simply check off whether the assignment was completed for attendance purposes, and can address the common issues in the next class session to facilitate discussion and understanding. Such assignments have the potential to motivate students to attend class.

## **Tardiness**

Students who are tardy to class can be both annoying to us as instructors, as well as disruptive to the class as a whole. Given that all of us have run late for an appointment or meeting at one time or another, how can we allow students enough leeway to get to class at a reasonable time without penalizing them for being five minutes late? Although one option would be to not start class until five minutes past the actual starting time, this would not be an effective use of your time or the time of the punctual students.

To avoid disruptions from late students, we suggest specifying a special seating area in your classroom that is left empty so that students who are tardy to class can sit in this designated area. This area should likely be placed near one of the doors to the classroom and need only include about ten seats. This area will allow you to tackle tardy behavior in two ways. First, it will minimize the disruption to the entire classroom, as it keeps tardy students from moving throughout the room and distracting others. Second, this seating area allows you to approach the students seated in this area after class to make sure you have documented their attendance. This will give the instructor personal contact with students who are late to class, and the one-on-one time may help prevent future problems or tardiness. Additionally, if you begin to see patterns of tardiness, you may address them with the student individually and make sure that you are holding the tardy student accountable.

## **Inappropriate Cell Phone & Laptop Use**

Cell phone use is something that is widely reported as being a classroom distraction. Cell phones ringing during class have been shown to be a disruption to learning, having significant negative effects on students' note taking abilities and test performance (End, Worthman, Mathews, & Wetterau, 2010). Professors have reported a wide range of responses to cell phone interruptions in their classes, and some

have gone so far as to call cell phone distractions a “technological terror” (Gilroy, 2004, 56). Surveys of college professors indicate that many are struggling to find ways to effectively address the issue (Gilroy, 2004). The following guidelines are ways to create a learning environment that is respectful of students who may, on rare occasions, need to have cell phone access during class, and at the same time, communicate firm guidelines that can be followed by all students.

- Remind students to turn off their cell phones before class by modeling turning off your own cell phone. This will not only remind them to turn off their phones, but it will ensure that yours does not ring during class, either.
- On a regular basis, keep watch for students using cell phones during class. If students are seen using their phones, request that they comply with the class guidelines.
- Make exceptions for emergencies. In the event that a student needs to be available to someone by phone during class, specify that they must alert you before class. They are then to keep the phone on the desk, silence the ringer, and when/if the emergency related call comes in, are to quietly dismiss themselves from the class and go into the hall to respond to the call.

In addition to cell phones, laptops can also be distracting to students during class. Although some students may use them to take notes, personal experience has provided ample evidence that students often use their computers for reasons other than class-related purposes. In order to avoid computer-related distractions during class, we suggest the following solution. On the first day of class, explain that laptops may be used in class, but only within a specified area within the classroom. Designate this area in a section of the classroom that you are able to monitor. This special seating area will allow you to check on student computer activities when you feel appropriate. Although this will not eliminate all computer-related distractions, it will discourage students from using their laptops in grossly inappropriate ways (e.g., watching pornography).

## **Out of Seat Behavior**

Many instructors think that they need to fill every class minute with teaching, even for classes that are several hours in length. They may feel like they have so little time to educate students, and as a result, view student breaks as a waste of precious instructional time. However, without planned and predictable (for the student) breaks, students tend to excuse themselves individually and/or take more than the allowed time when sporadic breaks are offered.

Instead of viewing breaks as time lost, instructors should consider the possible benefits of preplanning breaks into longer classes. Planned breaks allow instructors to maintain more control over out of seat student behavior. In the large classroom, an ideal method to implement breaks in order to reduce student out-of-seat behavior, is to teach expectations. At the start of the semester, instructors should clearly explain expectations for out-of-seat behavior and include these expectations in the course syllabus. Also, at the start of each class, instructors should make breaks predictable by informing students when they will occur and the amount of time that will be allowed. The delivery of promised breaks should be consistent, and instructors should resume class at the end of the planned break time. This will help students to see that you are reliable, and will build trust so that they can rely on the promised break time to address their needs. If all of the above are followed, these guidelines should help limit the likelihood

of the occurrence of student out of seat disruptions.

## **Cheating**

In large classes, we often have to rely upon multiple-choice exams, and it may be difficult to monitor students for cheating behavior. One way to deal with this issue is to create multiple versions of the same exam with the questions scrambled in a different order (e.g., Houston, 1983). Using different versions of the exam will make it harder for students to copy correct answers from a neighbor's exam.

An alternative option is that you “allow” students to cheat. While this seems like a counterintuitive solution, let us put it into context. Students can cheat in any number of ways in today's classrooms. Some methods of cheating include the use of crib sheets, copying answers from a peer, or using technology to get answers. In fact, a quick search on the internet will bring you to a myriad of websites giving advice on exactly how to cheat (e.g., [www.wikihow.com/Cheat-On-a-Test](http://www.wikihow.com/Cheat-On-a-Test)).

One way to allow students to “cheat” while reducing the chances that they will resort to other forms of cheating is to allow students to create their own cheat sheets for exams and then let them use these on the exam. When there is a lot of information covered for an exam, it is unlikely that student will be able to make notes on everything that will be covered on the exam. Additionally, it encourages students to at least look at the material prior to the exam, and they are often happy to have this cheat sheet opportunity, as they think they are getting an advantage. The main point is to encourage students to still study, as the notes they take will not be able to cover everything they need to know, but can serve as a memory aid if they get stuck.

## **Conclusion**

The ideas discussed in this article describe how to prevent and address possible student behavior problems that may be present in large postsecondary classrooms. The problem behaviors discussed above (student anonymity, student absences, tardiness, lack of academic motivation, inappropriate cell phone and laptop use, out of seat behavior, and cheating) are commonly occurring, and the strategies and/or interventions we suggest to address them require little effort to carry out. One commonality found among each of the strategies is a focus on instructor behavior, namely, instructor-implemented tactics. As instructors, we are charged with establishing an ideal learning environment. By managing our performance through the application of the above mentioned strategies, we can fulfill that charge within the large postsecondary classroom.